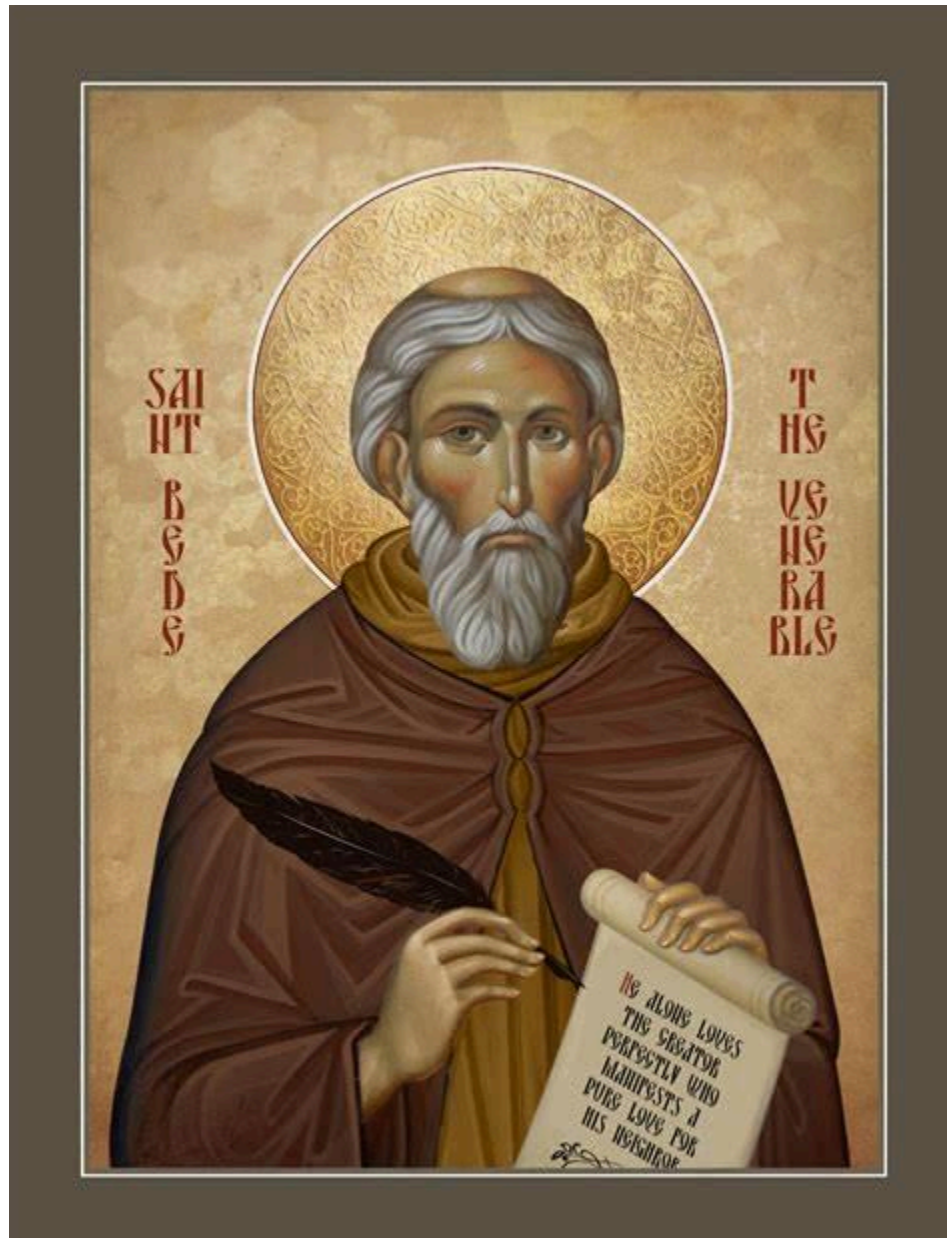


Bede: Conversion of England



[Icon of St. Bede the Venerable](#)

The Arrival in Kent of the Missionaries sent By Gregory the Great (597)

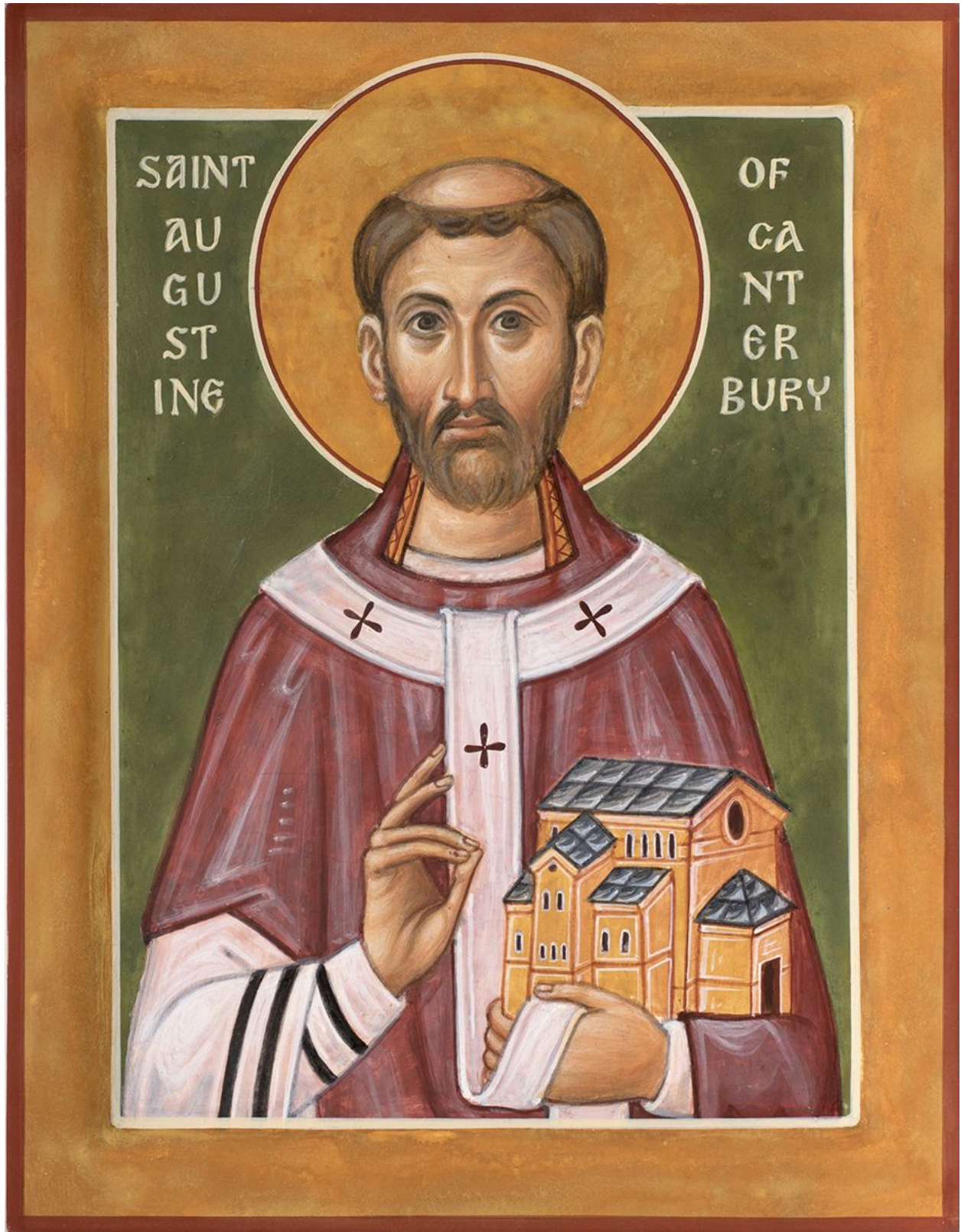
In the year of our Lord 582, Maurice, the fifty-fourth emperor from Augustus, ascended the throne and reigned twenty-one years. In the tenth year of his reign, Gregory, a man renowned for learning and behaviour, was promoted to the apostolic see of Rome,' and presided over it for thirteen years, six months, and ten days. He, being moved by divine inspiration, about the one hundred and fiftieth year after the coming of the English into Britain, sent the servant of God, Augustine, and with him several other monks who feared the Lord to preach the word of God to the English nation. . . .

[Augustine, with his companions, arrived in Britain.]. The powerful Ethelbert was, at that time, the king of Kent; he extended his dominions as far as the great river Humber, which divided the southern Saxons from the northern. On the east of Kent is the large Isle of Thanet, containing, according to the English way of reckoning, six hundred families and divided from the other land by the river Wantsum, which is about three furlongs across and fordable only in two places, for both ends of it run into the sea.

On this island landed the servant of our Lord, Augustine, and his companions, being, as is reported, nearly forty men. They had, by order of the blessed Pope Gregory, brought interpreters of the nation of the Franks, and sending to Ethelbert, signified that they were come from Rome and brought a joyful message, which most undoubtedly assured to all that took advantage of it everlasting joys in heaven, and a kingdom that would never end with the living and true God.

The king, having heard this, ordered them to stay in that island where they had landed and that they should be furnished with all necessities till he should consider what to do with them. For he had heard of the Christian religion, having a Christian wife of the royal family of the Franks, called Bertha, whom he had received from her parents upon condition that she should be permitted to practice her religion with the bishop, Luidhard, who was sent with her to preserve the faith.

Some days later, the king came into the island and, sitting in the open air, ordered Augustine and his companions to be brought into his presence. For he had taken precaution that they should not come to him in any house, lest, according to an ancient superstition, if they practiced any magical arts, they might impose upon him and so get the better of him. But they came furnished with divine, not with magic, power, bearing a silver cross for their banner, and the image of our Lord and Saviour painted on a board; and singing"the litany, they offered up their prayers to the Lord for eternal salvation both of themselves and of those to whom they came.



[St Augustine of Canterbury](#)

When Augustine had sat down, pursuant to the king's commands, and preached to him and his attendants there present the word of life, the king answered thus: " Your words and promises are very fair, but they are new to us and of uncertain import, and I cannot approve of them so far as to forsake that which I have so long followed with the whole English nation. But because you are come from far into my kingdom, and, as I conceive, are desirous to impart to us those things which you believe to be true and most beneficial, we will not molest you, but give you favourable entertainment and take care to supply you with the necessary sustenance; nor do we forbid you to preach and gain as many as you can to your religion."

Accordingly, he permitted them to reside in the city of Canterbury, which was the metropolis of all his dominions, and pursuant to his promise, besides allowing them sustenance, did not refuse them the liberty to preach. . . .

As soon as they entered the dwelling place assigned them, they began to imitate the course of life practiced in the primitive church: applying themselves to frequent prayer, watching, and fasting; preaching the word of life to as many as they could; despising all worldly things, as not belonging to them; receiving only their necessary food from those they taught; living in all respects conformably to what -they prescribed to others, and being always disposed to suffer any adversity, and even to die for that truth which they preached. In short, several believed and were baptized, admiring the simplicity of their innocent life and the sweetness of their heavenly doctrine.

On the east side of the city, there was a church dedicated to St. Martin, built whilst the Romans were still on the island. In this church, the queen, who, as has been said before, was a Christian, used to pray. In this, they first began to meet, sing, pray, say mass, preach, and baptize until the king, being converted to the faith, allowed them to preach openly and to build or repair churches in all places.

When he among the rest, induced by the unspotted life of these holy men and their delightful promises, which, by many miracles, they proved to be most certain, believed and was baptized, greater numbers began daily to flock together to hear the word and, forsaking their heathen rites, to associate themselves, by believing, to the unity of the Church of Christ.

Gregory the Great: Instructions to the Missionaries

The Letter to Mellitus of 601

When Almighty God shall bring you to the most reverend Bishop Augustine, our brother, tell him what I have, after mature deliberation on the affairs of the English, determined upon,

namely, that the temples of the idols in that nation ought not to be destroyed, but let the idols that are in them be destroyed; let holy water be made and sprinkled in the said temples - let altars be erected, and relics placed. For if those temples are well built, it is requisite that they be converted from the worship of devils to the service of the true God; that the nation, seeing that their temples are not destroyed, may remove the error from their hearts and, knowing and adoring the true God, may the more familiarly resort to the places to which they have been accustomed.

And because they have been used to slaughter many oxen in the sacrifices to devils, some solemnity must be substituted for them on this account, as, for instance, that on the day of the dedication, or of the nativities of the holy martyrs whose relics are there deposited, they may build themselves huts of the boughs of trees about those churches which have been turned to that use from temples, and celebrate the solemnity with religious feasting, no more offering beasts to the devil, but killing cattle to the praise of God in their eating, and returning thanks to the Giver of all things for their sustenance; to the end that, whilst some outward gratifications are permitted them, they may the more easily consent to thee inward consolations of the grace of God.

There is no doubt that it is impossible to efface everything at once from their obdurate minds because those who endeavour to ascend to the highest place rise by degrees or steps and not by leaps. This the Lord made himself known to the people of Israel in Egypt: and yet he allowed them to use the sacrifices which they were wont to offer to the devil in his own worship, commanding them in his sacrifice to kill beasts to the end that, changing their hearts they may lay aside one part of the sacrifice whilst retained another: that whilst they offered the same beasts which they were wont to offer, they should offer them to God, and not to idols, and thus they would no longer be the same sacrifices.





The Oldest Church in England: St Martin's Church Canterbury. St Martin's Church was altered and extended in the 6th, 7th and 14th centuries, but the southern wall retains its Roman fabric.

The Conversion of Northumbria

[Edwin, the king of Northumbria, urged by his Christian wife Ethelberga and by the bishop Paulinus,] answered that he was both willing and bound to receive the new faith which the bishop taught but that he wished, nevertheless, to confer about it with his principal friends and counsellors, to the end that, if they also were of his opinion, they might all be cleansed together in Christ, the Fount of Life. Paulinus consented, and the king did as he said; for holding a council with the wise men, he asked of everyone in particular what he thought of the new doctrine and the new worship that was preached.

To which the chief of his priests, Coifi, immediately answered: "O king, consider what this is which is now preached to us; for verily I declare to you that the religion which we have hitherto professed has, as far as I can learn, no virtue in it. For none of your people has applied himself more diligently to the worship of our gods than I; and yet there are many who receive greater favours from you and are more preferred than I, and who are more prosperous in all their undertakings. Now, if the gods were good for anything, they would rather forward me who has been more careful to serve them. It follows, therefore, that if upon examination you find those

new doctrines which are now preached to us better and more efficacious, we should immediately receive them without any delay' "

Another of the king's chief men, approving of Coifi's words and exhortations, presently added: "The present life man, O king, seems to me, in comparison with that time which is unknown to us, like to the swift flight of a sparrow through the room wherein you sit at supper in winter amid your officers and ministers, with a good fire in the midst whilst the storms of rain and snow prevail abroad; the sparrow, I say, flying in at one door and immediately another, whilst he is within is safe from the wintry but after a short space of fair weather he immediately vanishes out of your sight into the dark winter from which he has emerged. So, this life of man appears to be short, but we are ignorant of what went before or what is to follow. If this new doctrine contains something more certain, it seems justly to deserve to be followed.'

The other elders and king's counsellors, by divine inspiration, spoke to the same effect., But Coifi added that he wished more attentively to hear Paulinus' discourse concerning the God whom he preached. So the bishop, having spoken by the king's command at greater length, Coifi, hearing his words,- cried out: "I have long since been sensible that there was nothing in that which we worshiped, because the more diligently I sought after truth in that worship the less I found it. But now I freely confess that such evident truth appears in this preaching as can confer on us the gifts of life, of salvation, and eternal happiness. For which reason I advise, O king, that we instantly abjure and set fire to those temples and altars which we have consecrated out reaping any benefits from them."

In short, the king publicly gave his permission to Paulinus to preach the gospel and, renouncing idolatry, declare he received the faith of Christ: and when he inquired high priest who should first profane the altars and temples of their idols, with the enclosures that were about them, the high priest answered, I; for who can more properly than myself destroy those things which I worshiped through ignorance, for an example to all others, through the wisdom which been given me by the true God? "

Then immediately, in contempt of his former superstitions, desired the king to furnish him with arms and a stallion, and mounting the latter, he set out to destroy the idols; for it was not lawful before for the high priest either to carry arms or to ride on any beast but a mare. Having, therefore, girt on a sword and carrying a spear in his hand, he mounted the king's stallion and proceeded to the idols. The multitude, beholding him, concluded he was distracted, but he lost no time, for as soon as he drew near the temple, he profaned the same, casting into it the spear

which he held. And rejoicing in the knowledge of the worship of the true God, he commanded his companions to destroy the temple, with all its enclosures, by fire.

This place where the idols were is still shown, not far from York, to the eastward, beyond the river Derwent, and is now called Godmundingham, where the high priest, by the inspiration of the true God, profaned and destroyed the altars which he had himself consecrated.



Lindisfarne Priory, founded in the 7th century, played a crucial role in the spread of Christianity in Northumbria. It was known for producing the Lindisfarne Gospels, a masterpiece of medieval art. [\[Source\]](#)

The Synod of Whitby: Celtic and Roman: The Controversy over the Date of Easter

The Roman monks, sent by Gregory the Great, found that the Christian missionaries from Ireland observed Easter at a different time from that appointed by the Roman church. After years of controversy, it was agreed at a synod should be held where the difficulty might be settled. Bede thus describes the arguments advanced by both sides and the victory of the Roman party:

[Bishop Colman spoke for the Scots (i.e. Irish) and said:] The Easter which I keep I received from my elders, who sent me hither as bishop; all our forefathers, men beloved of God, are

known to have kept it after the same manner; and that this may not seem to any contemptible or worthy to be rejected, it is the same which St. John the Evangelist, the disciple beloved of our Lord, with all the churches he presided, is recorded to have observed." . . .

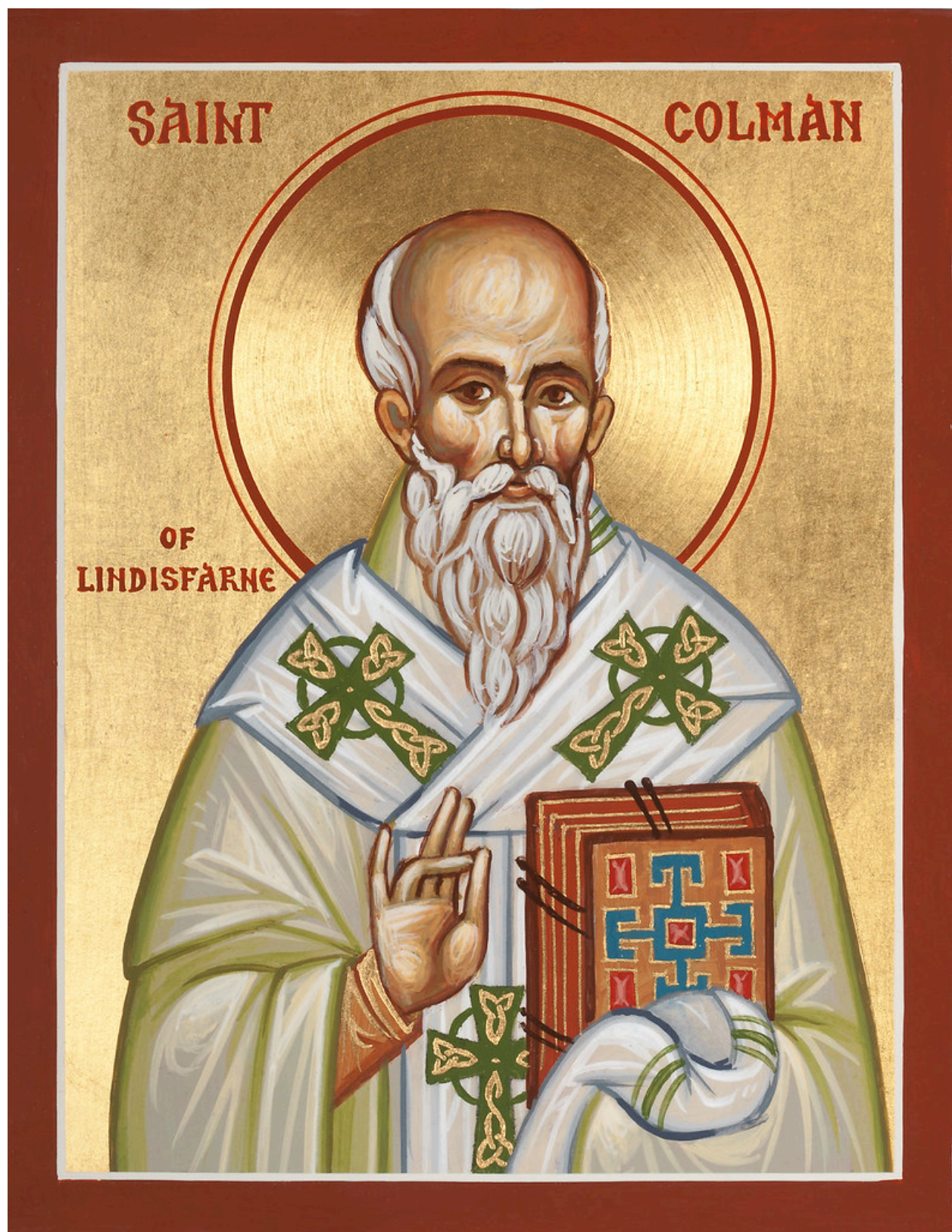
Then Wilfrid was ordered by the king to speak for the Roman practice: " The Easter which we observe we saw, celebrated by all at Rome, where the blessed apostles, Peter, and Paul, lived, taught, suffered, and were buried - we saw the same done in Italy and in France, when we travelled through those countries for pilgrimage and prayer. found that Easter was celebrated at one and the same time in Africa, Asia, Egypt, Greece, and all the world, wherever the Church of Christ is spread abroad, through the various nations and tongues, except only among these and their accomplices in obstinacy, I mean the Picts and the Britons, who foolishly, in these two remote islands of the world, and only in part even of them, oppose all the rest of the universe. . . .

You certainly sin if, having heard the decree of the apostolic see, and of the universal Church, and that Holy Writ confirms the same, you refuse to follow them; for, though your fathers were holy, do you think that their small number, in a corner of the remotest island, is to be preferred before the universal Church of Christ throughout the world? And though that Columba of yours (and, I may say, ours also, if he was Christ's servant) was a holy man and powerful in miracles, yet should he be preferred before the most blessed prince of the apostles, to whom our Lord said, 'Thou art Peter, and upon this rock, I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give up to thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven?'

When Wilfrid had spoken thus, the king said, "Is it true, Colman, that these words were spoken to Peter by our Lord?" He answered, "It is true, O king!" Then said he, "Can you show any such power given to your Columba?" Colman answered, " None." Then added the king, " Do both of you agree that these words were principally directed to Peter and that the keys of heaven were given to him by our Lord?" They both answered, We do." Then the king concluded, "And I also say unto you, that he is the doorkeeper, whorl I will not contradict, but will, as far as I know, and am able in all things obey his decrees, lest when I come to the gate of the kingdom of heaven, there should be none to open them he being my adversary who is proved to have the keys." The king, having said this, all present, both great and small, gave their assent and, renouncing the more imperfect institution, resolved to conform to that which they found to be better.

From the accounts translated in J. H. Robinson,

Readings in European History, (Boston: Ginn, 1905), pp. 97-105.



[St. Colman of Lindisfarne](#)

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